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African Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility.

Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 264 pp.

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The “wrongheaded yet amazingly persistent” (117) image of Africa as dark, violent, and desperate has generated a proliferation of other, more hopeful images to disrupt this incessantly pessimistic story. One trope has been to reframe “grin and bear it” as “suffering and smiling” to celebrate the extraordinary resilience of Africans in the face of myriad difficulties. Another turns away from social problems entirely to highlight the cosmopolitan achievements of the continent's elite in art, architecture, and business. Radical social inequality has led to radically bifurcated accounts of the social world. A stark divide stands between a default pessimism and a mandatory optimism that has made hope into one of Africa's greatest resources, complete with its own extractive industry. The challenge for anthropologists is to hold these multiple extremes in view while describing the nonextreme, everyday, mundane ways they are implicated in the reproduction of social life, economic practice, spatial form, and cultural creativity.

African Futures takes up this challenge by attending to the multiplicity and intermingling of modes of time reckoning in post–Cold War Africa. In their introductory essay, Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio observe the failure of teleologies like development, modernization, and good governance as both analytic categories and social projects. Yet they note the continuing importance that modernist keywords and their binary pairings (crisis, backwardness, corruption) have as emic concepts in diverse African contexts. The book aims to cultivate a new vocabulary to observe, describe, apprehend, and theorize futurity as plural, open-ended, and nonlinear. Its 15 essays are snapshots of emergent futures that explore the paradox of permanent crisis, the economies of futurity, dreams of permanence in the context of forced temporariness, and the geographically uneven distribution of futures.

Janet Roitman and Brian Larkin call into question the structural-functionalist assumptions that underpin crisis narratives, offering a conceptual history of crisis and pointing out that a term that once referred to a critical turning point has come to define a historical condition. In the wake of crisis, Juan Obarrio argues, Mozambican state-making projects reanimate colonial modes of customary law, locating the future of the nation in the violent colonial fetish of tradition. Describing the life of what he calls rough towns, AbdouMalik Simone shows that in the face of persistent crisis, it is in fact stability or permanence that requires ethnographic explanation by attending to the labor involved in keeping contingencies at bay. Here transformation is posited as the permanent condition of urban life, not a unique exceptional event. Labeling one's condition as crisis does not strictly subscribe to normative visions of the future but names a sense of possible future foreclosed while holding on to the possibility that the future might be—and should be—otherwise than the present.

Few facts make more manifest the instability of futures and presents than the fluctuating value of currencies. Jane Guyer lays out an agenda for empirical research into the worlds of currency, asking how devaluations shape consumer economies, how differences in currency values structure migration patterns, and how people deal with money when the future of currencies is radically opaque. The fundamental ambiguity of currency comes to the fore in Charles Piot's

description of a Togolese Ponzi scheme in which initial investors of \$850 or more were repaid with highly visible monthly bundles of cash or commodities. In the context of currency devaluation and the state's abandonment of any distributive collective future-making project, the scheme was shuttered by the authorities. Nonetheless, Piot argues, it disclosed the workings of “miraculous time” (115), a simultaneously nostalgic, hopeful, and nonlinear aspiration that the future may differ from the present. More disturbingly, Danny Hoffman theorizes the “monetization of the imaginary” (101) in Sierra Leone, asserting that in the disenchanted aftermath of broken nationalist and revolutionary development promises, cash alone holds the potential to mobilize young men for the violent labor of war. Examining the links between debt and violence, Michael Ralph argues that not only African states’ diplomatic standings but their credit profiles have largely become an effect of their willingness to enroll their youth in global military ventures of peacekeeping and the War on Terror.

Writing with a more sweeping register, Achille Mbembe proposes that “one of the most brutal effects of neoliberalism in Africa ... has been the generalization and radicalization of a condition of temporariness” (222). This perpetual uncertainty, he observes, means that huge amounts of effort and debt are required of the poor and middle class alike to simply produce the lived semblance of permanence, be it of work, of home, or of personal relations. Ramah McKay illustrates how an explicit discourse of temporariness reflected in statements like “we're just a program that will end one day” (57) authorizes nongovernmental interventions that nonetheless become perennial—an important distinction from being permanent—features of public health provision. She documents how aid recipients in Mozambique actively critique this mandatory temporariness and divert food aid into broader familial networks expected to endure longer than humanitarian horizons. Brad Weiss examines the multiple meanings of development in Tanzania, showing how it expresses a precarious sense of growth and asserts the moral value of particular socially beneficial modes of moving forward slowly and under control as opposed to the dangerously hasty and individualized “fast business” (205): antisocial modes of accumulation available to those working in mines or transportation. Thus, development is not simply a straightforward imposition of teleological sensibility but articulates “a form of congealed desire” (49). When used in critiques of corruption, development offers a vocabulary through which people criticize the temporariness of emergent forms of fast business that destabilize the unfolding of more moral economies.

For many young people, the future is elsewhere. Jennifer Cole describes marriages through which Malagasy women and French men collaborate to renew social reproduction in both provincial French villages (by caring for the elderly and laboring on farms) and coastal Madagascar (by building houses and making sacrificial connections to ancestors). This futurity depends on essentialist gendered and racial self-narration and the ability to navigate ever-tighter European border regimes. Peter Geschiere and Antoine Socpa describe how Cameroonians theorize similar centrifugal quests for futures as “bush-falling” (171), emphasizing the luck required to find oneself a viable future in the context of fatally risky border crossings. Capital also figures the future as existing elsewhere. In his analysis of Kinshasa's charter cities, projects to construct a new urban future and “obliterate the reality of millions of local lives” (153) in favor of Afro-optimistic gated communities, Filip De Boeck shows that futures are a commodity that can be imported en masse.

African Futures offers a set of terms that flit between emic and etic to name and theorize the foreign country that is the future. Among others, these include miracle, (broken) promise, hedging, hesitation, shadow, currency, coordination, rooting, and movement. These terms “write the world from Africa” (211) as a mythic charter and an everyday diacritic. But the insights these essays provide need not be contained by African exceptionalism. They reveal the constitutive temporal uncertainties of extractive development and Ponzi capitalism in the world at large.